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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000835

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/PMBS, INR/EAP, USIP-SOLOMON
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SUBJECT: SULU UPDATE: MAJOR FIGHTING GIVES WAY TO GUERRILLA WARFARE AS IDP,S LANGUISH

REF: A. MANILA 682
 1B. MANILA 630
 1C. 04 MANILA 5628

Classified By: Political Officer Joseph Saus
for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Fighting has subsided on Jolo Island but intermittent skirmishes continue. The military continues pursuit operations against enemy forces now employing guerrilla tactics by squad-sized units. The fighting has so far displaced over 32,000 people. Often impassable roads -- susceptible to hostile fire -- and inadequate infrastructure have hobbled relief efforts. Local and international humanitarian organizations have called for combatants on both sides to respect the humanitarian needs of the civilians affected by the fighting. A cease-fire appears unlikely. The GRP appointed a new judge for the rebellion case against former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) Chairman Nur Misuari, but only his release or immediate trial in Jolo might placate those said to be fighting on his behalf. More low-level fighting and continued problems for IDPs are likely, further damaging prospects for development and investment in this already poor area. End Summary.

A Shift In Military Operations

12. (C) The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) succeeded on February 16 in taking control of Misuari Renegade (or Breakaway) Group leader Ustadz Haber Malik's stronghold, renaming it "Camp LTC Dennis Villanueva" in memory of the 53rd Infantry Battalion Commander killed in action on February 10. Sulu Provincial Administrator Don Loong told poloff on February 22 that troops found the stronghold largely empty, likely a result of the AFP's aerial attacks. He added that the militants have faded into the mountains and jungles to engage in guerrilla warfare -- their specialty and of particular challenge to the AFP (ref B). Despite a deployment of about 5,000 AFP troops to Jolo Island, the AFP has a history of minimal success in search and destroy missions. Malik's fighters have dispersed into squad-sized units to conserve ammunition and supplies, and will likely continue to employ sniping and hit-and-run operations further to harass and inflict casualties upon the AFP. However, the militants are increasingly resorting to "desperate" options that include extortion of money from local village chiefs, according to Loong.

The Humanitarian Consequences

13. (C) The fighting in Jolo Island of Sulu Province, which began on February 7, has so far resulted in an estimated 32,300 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Many are in far-flung villages outside the provincial capital of Jolo Town. Some have left the province entirely, escaping to the adjacent island provinces of Basilan and Tawi Tawi. Food and medicine are in short supply. Loong noted that the current average ration is five cans of sardines and five kilograms of rice per family per week. The Department of Social Welfare and Development has the lead on the humanitarian response, aided by the Philippine Red Cross. Hostile fire and Sulu's already inadequate road system have slowed relief efforts. According to Amina Rasul of the Philippine Council on Islam and Democracy, unexploded ordinance also poses a threat to relief operations. Loong told poloff that Sulu Province had convened a Provincial Disaster Coordinating Council (PDCC) and set up an Area Coordination Center, based in the Office of Sulu Governor Benjamin Loong. PDCC officials have lamented so-far inadequate amounts of relief goods, including food, medicine, and non-food items.

14. (U) The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) released a statement on February 21 calling for both sides to respect humanitarian law under the Geneva Conventions and associated protocols and treaties. The statement emphasized humanitarian laws prohibiting: violence directed against civilians aimed at spreading terror; murder, summary killings, torture, rape, and cruel treatment of hostages; use of minors under 18 in hostilities; and inhumane treatment of wounded or sick fighters or those captured or surrendered.

The statement also called for care of the wounded and sick without delay and distinction and urged both parties also mutually to respect medical personnel, units, facilities, and vehicles as well as those of the ICRC and Philippine Red Cross.

Calls For Cease-fire Fall On Deaf Ears

15. (SBU) In a press release on February 23, the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR) expressed concern about "risk in the lives of individuals caught in the melee," called for respect for human rights including "health and education especially for the youth," and vowed to keep a "close watch" on the situation through its regional office. Amina Rasul (a 2004 opposition candidate for Senate) accused the GRP of catering to hawks within the administration. Senator Ramon Magsaysay told Pol/C on February 22 that he planned to introduce a Senate resolution urging a "cessation of hostilities," which he believed might be more acceptable to the GRP than a "cease-fire." Others have advocated the involvement of ASEAN or the Organization of Islamic Conference -- due to its role as signed witnesses of the 1996 GRP/MNLF Final Peace Agreement -- in brokering a cease-fire. However, Malacanang Palace and the AFP senior leadership at this time still appear steadfast in calling for Malik's surrender and in opposing a cease-fire.

Some Movement On Misuari

16. (C) On February 22, the Philippine Supreme Court appointed a new judge (Makati Regional Trial Court Judge Ricardo Rosario) in the three-year old Nur Misuari rebellion case, after the Calamba Regional Trial Court judge handling the case (Judge Estella Cabuco Andres) retired. Judge Andres had consistently denied Misuari bail, and many commentators had expressed concern that her retirement presented the possibility of further delays in hearings of the case. Misuari on February 22 told a visiting Congressional delegation from the special Committee on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity that he would appeal for a cease-fire only if the GRP requested him to do so. According to Congressman Satur Ocampo, Misuari "absolutely denied" having ordered his supporters to attack government targets, denied links between the MNLF and the Abu Sayyaf Group, and warned that fighting could spread to other provinces.

Comment: More fighting, less development

17. (C) Some commentators have expressed worry that, by overtaking Malik's stronghold, the AFP could find itself in a situation similar to its year-long occupation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's "Bulio Complex," from which it then had to redeploy in mid-2004 as one of the conditions for resumption of peace talks. The major difference is that the MBG does not fall under the terms of the 1996 GRP/MNLF Peace Agreement, and the GRP has not sought negotiations with it. With tactical and numerical superiority, the AFP will likely continue at least low level assaults, with the MBG again engaging into protracted and sometimes lethal guerrilla attacks. This situation is clearly unfortunate for the existing and potential IDPs, as well as the overall prospects for even cautious development work and investment in the Philippines' already poorest province (ref C). End Comment.

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